Speech acts and speech act sequences: greetings and farewells in the history of American English

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Abstract: Greetings and farewells mark the boundaries of conversations; they are often formulaic and are generally claimed to be devoid of propositional content. However, they are often embedded in longer exchanges, and within such exchanges individual expressions may or may not have propositional content. This contribution discusses some of the inherent problems of retrieving speech acts, such as greetings and farewells, from a corpus. This is illustrated with a diachronic analysis of greetings and farewells in two hundred years of American English as documented in the 400-million-word Corpus of Historical American English (COHA). In the nineteenth century, the most frequent greetings were "good morning" and "how are you?" and the most frequent leave-taking expression was farewell while in Present-day American English the expressions hi and hello dominate as greetings and goodbye and "bye bye" as leave-taking expressions. The two phrases "how do you do?" and "how are you?" serve as examples that show how formulaic and literal uses have coexisted over the entire period covered by COHA, with a shift from a predominance of literal uses to a predominance of formulaic uses, particularly in the case of "how do you do?". However, both phrases remain ambiguous in their uses. The interactants discursively assign a more literal or more formulaic force to them.

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Speech acts and speech act sequences: Greetings and farewells in the history of American English

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1 Introduction

At first sight it appears that greetings and farewells are fairly simple and well-defined speech acts. They mark the boundaries of conversations, they are often ritualistic and they have been claimed to be devoid of propositional content (Searle 1969: 67). However, a closer study reveals that the situation is more complex. Greetings and farewells are often embedded in longer exchanges and within such exchanges individual expressions may or may not have propositional content. Definitions of greetings and farewells may focus on the opening or closing interaction of an encounter between two or more individuals or they may focus on individual expressions that are used in such interactions, such as *hello*, *good morning*, *how are you*, *goodbye* or *farewell*, and, as a result, investigations of greetings and farewells have either focused on the interactional sequences or on the formulaic expressions that regularly occur in these sequences.

In this contribution, I will focus on the usage patterns that are connected with greetings and farewells. Thus, greetings and farewells are not seen as speech acts that can be studied in isolation. The formulaic expressions must be investigated within the context in which they occur.

In a historical context, there are additional obstacles that need to be overcome. In order to trace greetings and farewells historically, a sufficient number of examples must be retrieved from historically stratified materials. However, a corpus search for specific speech acts is not straightforward, and I aim to use this study to highlight some of the problems that are posed by the search for specific speech acts. In the next section I try to disentangle the relationship between specific speech acts and the formulaic elements that are used to perform them. Some speech acts can appear in a seemingly infinite number of creative forms, while others, such as greetings and farewells tend to occur in a fairly small number of formulaic guises. In the third section I will discuss the implications that this has for corpus-based investigations of speech acts. In section 4, I will survey some of the relevant scholarly literature on greetings and farewells as a background to the diachronic analysis of greetings and farewell in section 5. Here I will present the results of a small case study of greetings and farewell in two hundred years of American English as documented in the 400-million-word *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA).

2 Speech acts and formulaicity

Greetings and farewells, or salutations for short, are speech acts that are often considered to be highly formulaic. There are just a limited number of expressions that can be used to enact them, e.g. *hello*, *hi*, or *good morning* for greetings or *goodbye*, *bye bye* or *good night* for farewells. Other speech acts regularly include formulaic elements, such as apologies, which often include elements such as *sorry*, *pardon* or *excuse* but on occasions more creative resources are used to enact an apology. Formulaic elements that have a close association with a given speech act are known as illocutionary force indicating

devices (IFIDs) (see Levinson 1983: 238; Aijmer 1996: 24) because they flag the illocutionary force of the utterance in which they occur. In fact, apologies have been argued to include such formulaic elements or IFIDs with sufficient regularity to make it possible to retrieve apologies more or less comprehensively from large electronic corpora, such as the *British National Corpus* (Deutschmann 2003). Thanking is another speech act that relies heavily on formulaic elements (see in particular Aijmer 1996, Schauer and Adolphs 2006 and Wong 2010). A large number of illocutionary acts, however, are regularly creative without any predictable or formulaic elements. Obvious examples would be assertions. In some cases, the formulaicity of specific speech acts is disputed, e.g. in the case of compliments. Manes and Wolfson (1981) have argued that compliments, at least in American English, are highly formulaic. A small number of syntactic patterns accounts for a very large proportion of compliments in their data set. However, it seems possible that the formulaicity of the compliments in their data set was a direct result of their collection method. They asked student researchers to write down a number of compliments that they encountered in their daily lives, and it seems possible that the compilers were more likely to spot a compliment when it conformed to some preconceived pattern (cf. Jucker 2009).

Thus, there is a scale of formulaicity ranging from speech acts that are heavily reliant on formulaic elements to speech acts for which no formulaic elements seem to exist. Such formulaic elements are helpful for speakers in that they can easily produce routine tasks in everyday life, and they are useful for listeners in that they can easily recognize the intended illocutionary force of the speech act.

But it would be too simple to assume that routine tasks, i.e. tasks that we perform in a very similar fashion very regularly in our daily lives, perhaps even many times during a single day, are devoid of propositional content only because speakers rely on formulaic items to enact them. In fact, I will show below, how interactants regularly discursively establish the formulaicity of specific IFIDs. In present-day American English, the phrase "how are you?", for instance, is often used in an entirely formulaic way with no apparent propositional content attended to by the interactants, but on occasions people actually do attend to the propositional content, and thus – discursively – turn the fixed formula into an actual request for information.

3 Speech acts and corpus searches

Evidence for manifestations of particular speech acts in the history of English and their developments to a large extent depends on corpora. Researchers, therefore, need tools to retrieve the speech acts under analysis from large texts, and such retrievals depend on specific search strings. However, this is only possible to the extent that a speech act has a predictable linguistic shape, as for instance in the form of the formulaic elements mentioned above. The simple search strings "sorry", "pardon" of "I apologize" will retrieve apologies, and "please", "can you", "would you mind" will retrieve requests (Aijmer 1996). For other speech acts more complex strings are needed. The search string "you ('re|are|were|look*|smell*|seem*) (really|very|such|so) _AJ0" (Jucker et al. 2008: 280), for instance, will retrieve compliments. But in all these cases these search strings only retrieve some but not all relevant speech acts (i.e. they have a limited recall) and they also retrieve material from the corpus which does not contain the relevant speech act

(i.e. they have limited precision). In each case, the researcher has to try to establish a list of search patterns that provides an optimal balance between precision and recall, but in many cases, this is extremely difficult. IFIDs are relatively clear cases because they are regularly associated with a given speech act. Other patterns may be typical for a particular speech act but without the regular association of an IFID, for instance the compliment patterns mentioned above. Some speech acts may be carried out in entirely novel and creative ways, which makes them inaccessible to search strings.

In addition to the searches for IFIDs and other typical patterns, it is also possible to search not for specific speech acts directly but to search for accounts of such speech acts, i.e. passages in which interlocutors discuss the use of a specific speech act or report on a speech act that was carried out at some other time. In a study of the history of compliments in American English in the nineteenth and twentieth century, for instance, we (Jucker and Taavitsainen 2014) analysed a total of 1740 hits of the term "compliment" in the *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA) and in the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA). Some of these hits were performative uses of the speech act verb "compliment" as in extract (1) but in most extracts the term was either used descriptively to talk about a compliment that had been paid at some other time (extract 2), or discursively to negotiate the status of an utterance as a compliment or perhaps something else (extract 3).

(1) Higgins, I must **compliment** you, you have an excellent crop of students, an excellent crop, Higgins. You ought to be proud. (COCA, 1993, Ernest J. Gaines, From A Lesson Before Dying.)

(2) "Well, no better time than a funeral for the voice of an angel." Lucy was alluding to a **compliment** Clover had gotten in her teenage pageant days and couldn't help but introduce into conversation at the oddest times, no matter how far-flung, no matter how off topic. (COCA, 2009, Sheila Curran, Everyone she loved: a novel)

(3) "You mean one end of the planet was hotter than the other?" "See, you're not as dumb as you like to act." She hesitated. "That was meant as a **compliment**." Another pause. "Anyway, there seems to have been more heat in the south, though as I said, this is all preliminary." (COCA, 2010, Richard A Lovett, Analog Science Fiction & Fact)

A careful analysis of the contexts of these occurrences of the term "compliment" often tells the researcher what the compliment was on (good looks, performances, or possessions, for instance), what the gender of the complimenter and of the complimentee was and so on. On this basis it turned out to be possible to provide corpus-based statistics on the demographics of compliments. Earlier research had consistently claimed that women are more likely both to pay and to receive compliments, but these studies were based on the diary method, which has the inherent danger that researchers' own gender influences the demographics of the collected compliments (e.g. Holmes 1988). In our data drawn from COHA and COCA, compliments were much more likely to be paid to and received by males. The tendency persists throughout the two centuries under investigation in spite of a steady decrease. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, more than 85 per cent of all compliments for which sufficient information was available were paid by males and over 60 per cent were received by males. At the end of the

twentieth century two thirds of the compliments were paid by males and almost exactly half of the compliments were received by males (Jucker and Taavitsainen 2014). It has to be noted, though, that these figures only pertain to compliments that were somehow made into the topic of a conversation and which, therefore, were retrievable with the metapragmatic search term "compliment", and it turned out that the vast majority of compliments retrieved in this way appear in the fictional data of the corpus, and most of these texts will have been written by male authors. It is an open question how these findings relate to the actual number of compliments paid and received in specific everyday contexts.

4 Greetings and farewells

Greetings and farewells are more formulaic than compliments and, therefore, easier to trace in a corpus, but so far few studies have used corpus-linguistic tools to study them. The research on greetings and farewells can be split into research that focuses on salutation expressions and their histories, that is to say on the lexical items that regularly occur in greetings and farewells, and into research that focuses on salutation exchanges, i.e. on the interactions that speakers carry out at the beginnings and ends of conversations.

Previous research on greetings and farewells has focused either on the formulaic expressions that are used in them or on the interactive sequences in which greetings and farewells are enacted. The former approach is usually chosen for diachronic studies of greetings and farewells (Lebsanft 1988; Arnovick 1999, Grzega 2005, 2008, Hauser 1998) while the latter is preferred for synchronic analyses of salutation sequences, in particular in less well-described languages, as for instance Youssouf, Grimshaw and Bird's (1976) analysis of greeting rituals of Tuareg men in Western Sahara or Duranti's (1997) analysis of greeting sequences in Western Samoa (see section 4 below).

A fair amount is known about the history of salutation expressions. The first detailed study of greetings was carried out by Stroebe (1911), who argued that *wes hal* and *wilcuman* or *þu art wilcuman* were the most frequent Old English greetings. Grzega (2005, 2008) provides more recent studies of the history of English salutation terms. In these studies, he deals with leave-taking terms and greeting terms respectively. In both cases, his study is mainly based on the relevant historical dictionaries, such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the *Dictionary of Old English* or the *Middle English Dictionary*. He finds almost no evidence for leave-taking terms in Old English, except for *wesaþ hale*, a wish for good health which could also be used as a greeting (Grzega 2005: 57). He provides a categorization of salutation expressions according to what he calls the motivation behind the expression. It is interesting to note that the categories are largely identical for greetings (Grzega 2008) and for leave-taking terms (Grzega 2005). Thus, he distinguishes expressive phrases (e.g. *Hi* as a greeting and *Ta-ra* as a leave taking term); wishes for a good time (e.g. *Have a good day*, which he includes in both lists); wishes for health or peace or well-being (e.g. *Wesaþ hale*, which also appears in both lists); and wishes for God's protection (e.g. *God bless you*, also in both list). Indications of happiness at the encounter (e.g. *Nice to meet you* or *welcome*) are listed only as greetings, while predictions of future encounters (e.g. *See you*) only occur in his list of leave-taking expressions (see also Jucker 2011a, 2011b). Similar studies for other languages have been

carried out by Lebsanft (1988) for greetings in Old French or by Rash (2004) and Hauser (1998) on greetings in Swiss German. Arnovick (1999) provided a more specific study of the diachronic development of a single leave-taking term. She studied the grammaticalization of Present-day English *goodbye* from the Middle English pious wish *God be with you*.

All these studies take the salutation expressions as a starting point and provide classifications and histories of the relevant lexical items. In Jucker (2011a), I cast the net in a slightly different way and investigated greetings and farewells in the narrow cosmos of Geoffrey Chaucer's fictional characters in his *Canterbury Tales*. Through a manual search, I retrieved all instances of greetings and farewells that were explicitly mentioned (67 greetings and 73 farewells). In some cases, the narrator only mentions the relevant speech act without giving the words that were exchanged. However, this study revealed elements that regularly co-occur with greetings and farewells, for instance some sort of identification of the addressee by means of a nominal term of address, blessings and wishes for the well-being of the addressee. I used these co-occurring elements to establish a categorization of greeting and farewell sequences.

Other researchers, especially anthropologists and ethnologists, approach greetings and farewells even more consistently from the perspective of the interaction rather than the individual expressions that are used for the purpose. Eisenstein et al. (1996), for instance, provide a classification of greeting exchanges in American English. They distinguish "greetings on the run", in which only brief phatic statements are exchanged; "speedy greetings", which are similar but with a minimal exchange of information; "chats", which include a brief discussion preceding the main purpose of the interaction; and "long greetings", which include more extensive elements of catching up after longer periods of separation. Extract (4) is an example of such a "long greeting".

(4)
Michelle: Bea!
Bea: Michelle!
Michelle: Where've you been? I haven't seen you around.
Bea: We were away. We just got back. What's new with you? What have you been up to?
Michelle: (Michelle reports on neighborhood news in detail.) We missed you. How are you? It's so nice to see you. Where'd you go?
Bea: (Bea describes her vacation in detail.)
Michelle: Well, I'm glad you're back. It's so nice to see you. I missed talking to you.
Bea: Aw. Well, we're back! How have you been doing?
(Eisenstein et al. 1996: 94)

Such a greeting exchange includes much more than the exchange of routine, and propositionally empty formulae even if the individual elements such as requests for news, expressions of delight at the encounter and so on may be largely ritualistic as well.

Extract (5) provides evidence from a sixteenth-century tract to show that such exchanges are not new, and it is interesting to see that very similar elements of catching up with news are included. To a modern reader it might appear a little strange to express surprise at seeing the addressee still alive but this is presumably connected to the way in which news travelled in the sixteenth century.

(5) *Spud*. GOD geve you good morrow, Maister Philoponus.
Philo. And you also, good brother Spudeus.
Spud. I am glad to see you in good health, for it was bruted abroad everywhere in our countrey (by reason of your discontinuance, I thinke) that you were dead long agoe.
Philo. In deede, I have spent some tyme abroad, els where than in my native countrey (I must needs confesse), but how false that report is (by whom soever it was first rumored, or how farre so ever it be dispersed) your present eyes can witnesse.
Spud. I pray you, what course of lyfe have you lead in your longe absence foorth of your owne country?
Miscellaneous Tracts. Temp. Eliz. & Jac. I, The Anatomie of Abuses 1583 (Google Books)

Salutation sequences can take a range of different formats in different languages depending on the cultural context in which they occur. In the Western Sahara, for instance, greeting rituals are particularly important for Tuareg men. According to Youssouf Grimshaw and Bird (1976), they often travel through the wilderness on their own. Encounters with other travellers are both vitally important in order to get news about the availability of water, for instance, but also potentially dangerous because the other traveller might become an enemy. The encounters are highly ritualized. Because of the flat desert landscape, the participants of the encounter riding on camels may have become aware of each other several hours before the actual encounter. The encounter itself goes through three stages. It starts with the *salaam*, i.e. a summons or attention getting followed by a handshake. The second stage consists of ritualized, largely propositionally empty greetings, which leads to the third stage in which actual information is exchanged (Youssouf Grimshaw and Bird 1976: 803-805).

Firth (1972: 1) defines greetings as "the recognition of an encounter with another person as socially acceptable." This stands in contrast to two people rubbing shoulders in a bus without greeting each other because such an encounter is not marked as socially acceptable. Duranti (1997), who reports on greetings in Western Samoa, proposes six criteria that can be used to compare greetings across different cultures and different languages.

1. near-boundary occurrence;
2. establishment of a shared perceptual field;
3. adjacency pair format;
4. relative predictability of form and content;
5. implicit establishment of a spatio-temporal unit of interaction; and
6. identification of the interlocutor as a distinct being worth recognizing.

(Duranti 1997: 67)

These criteria apply both to the speedy greetings mentioned above and to the elaborate and ritualized encounters of Tuareg men in the Western Sahara. They allow for completely formulaic greetings, which Searle (1969: 67) must have had in mind when he

claimed that greetings were devoid of propositional meaning, and they allow for longer exchanges in which real information is being exchanged.

> In fact, if we start from the assumption that what is said and done in any human encounter lives along a formulaic-creative continuum, greetings might simply be interactions that tend to fall toward the formulaic side. We cannot, however, in principle assume that, because greetings are formulaic, (i) they are always completely predictable, (ii) they have no information value, and (iii) participants have nothing invested in the propositional value of what is said. (Duranti 1997: 70)

Several researchers also comment on the gestures accompanying greetings, in particular the handshake. It is interpreted as a symbol of trust (e.g. Firth 1972; Duranti 1997: 64). Consider also the handshake of Tuareg men who meet in the desert and shake hands while sitting on their camels which leads to potentially dangerous situation if one of the greeters turns out to be foe rather than friend and tries to unseat the other greeter.

> The context for understanding what people say during greetings is nothing more or nothing less than the culture that supports and is supported by the encounters in which greetings occur or that are constituted by them. (Duranti 1997: 67)

5 Salutation sequences in COHA

The *Corpus of Historical American English* extends over 200 years (from the 1810s to the 2000s) and comprises over 400 million words (http://corpus.byu.edu/coha/ 23 January 2017). It claims to be a balanced corpus across four genres: fiction, popular magazines, newspapers and non-fiction books. Fiction comprises a little over half of the material in each period. Newspapers only start in the 1860s, but apart from that the general distribution across the four genres is very similar for each decade in the corpus. This means that observed changes across time should reflect actual changes in the language rather than changes in the genre balance (see information on "composition of the corpus" at http://corpus.byu.edu/coha/).

5.1 Frequency development of salutation expressions

A lexical search for relevant salutation expressions locates greetings and farewells in a diachronic corpus, but recall is limited. It does not retrieve conversation openings or closings in which unusual expressions were used or in which the act of greeting or of bidding farewell was carried out in a non-verbal manner with gestures, for instance. An extension of the search terms to possible candidates for unusual salutation expressions or to descriptions of salutation gestures have the tendency to retrieve many unwanted hits, that is to say they have a very limited precision.

Hi, for instance, which appears to be a very popular greeting in Present-day American English, has very limited precision. It is interesting to see, though, that the precision does not stay constant across the decades in COHA. A search for *hi* in COHA gives a relatively consistent increase in the frequency of *hi* from about six instances per one million words in the 1880s to about 24 instances in the 2000s. However, an analysis of a sample one hundred hits per decade (or all of them if there were fewer than one hundred for any given decade) revealed that there is not only an increase of hits across the centuries but also a significant increase of the precision across the centuries. Before 1850

none of the instances of *hi* can be classified as a greeting. From the 1850s to the 1920s, about ten to 25 per cent of all hits are instances of a greeting. In the 1930s, the percentage rises to 38 per cent, and from the 1940s, the percentage is consistently higher than 50 per cent reaching over 90 per cent in the last two decades (1990s and 2000s).

Figure 1 gives an overview of the development of the most frequent greeting expressions that are attested in COHA. Manual spot checks for all these expressions revealed that false hits are rare except for *hi* mentioned above and, to a much smaller extent *how are you* (see section 5.2). The figures for *hi* and *how are you* have, therefore, been adjusted by removing false hits in order to account for actual hits of greetings. The frequency results provided by COHA for individual decades have been re-calculated for four periods of half a century, each to highlight the development over larger intervals.[1]

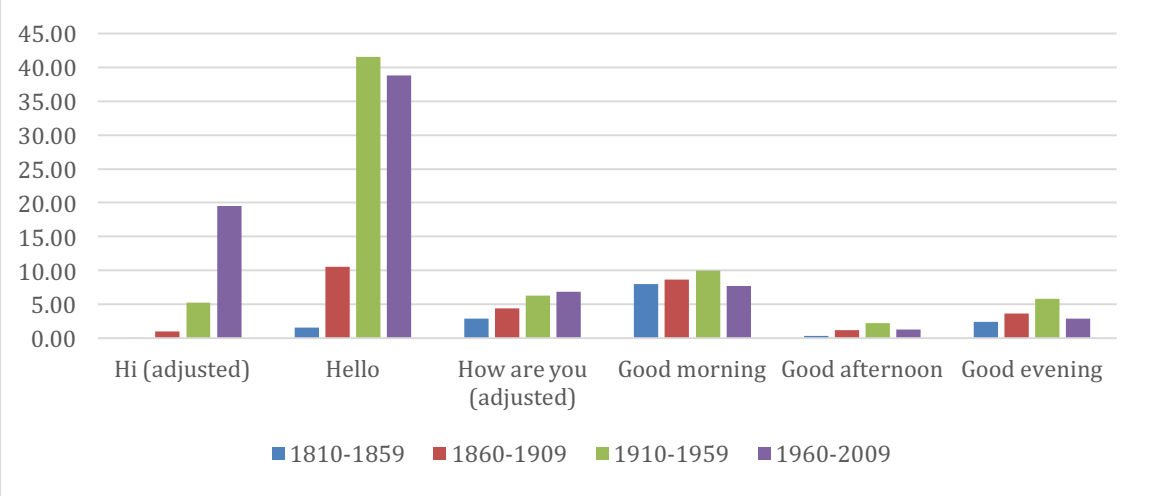

Figure 1: Greeting expressions in COHA (frequency per million words; values for *hi* and *how are you* adjusted to exclude false hits)

Figure 1 reveals that there are fairly significant differences across the two centuries covered by COHA. At the beginning, *good morning* stands out as the most frequent greeting with about eight instances per million words. By the second half of the nineteenth century *hello* starts to overtake *good morning* and then shoots up in frequency to over 40 instances per million words. At present, I do not have an explanation for this increase. It does not appear to take over from other expressions and thus it might be a reflection of a general increase of greeting encounters in the corpus. The frequency for *good morning* changes only minimally. *Good afternoon* and *good evening* both remain relatively insignificant for the entire period covered by COHA. *Good night* is not included in this list because it is exclusively used as a leave-taking term (Biber et al. 1999: 1086; see also Figure 2 below). The phrase *how are you* starts out with a frequency of less than three instances per million words in the first period and steadily increases to about seven instances per million words in the last period. It is, of course, not a straightforward greeting. It often serves as a real question asking the addressee about his

[1] The re-calculations obviously took into account the different corpus size of the different decades of COHA.

or her well-being. I will look at this phrase in more detail in the next section. Extracts (6) to (8) illustrate the earliest uses of *hello* in COHA.

(6) The outlaw had not placed himself within the shadow of the trees in time sufficient to escape the searching gaze of the woodman, who, seeing the movement and only seeing one person, leaped nimbly forward with a light footstep, speaking thus as he approached: "Hello! there – who's that – the pedler, sure. (COHA, 1834, William Gilmore Simms, Guy Rivers: A Tale of Georgia)

(7) You see, I didn't come right here – you know such a power of things to see here that a body never sees afore, they strike the mind at once, and time passes afore one becomes anxious of its departure. Hello! here comes the chap with my trunk. (COHA, 1841, Lawrence La Bree, Ebenezer Venture)

(8) He wears a red flannel shirt and tarpaulin hat; and possesses a bull-dog countenance expressive of the utmost ferocity. "Hello, you fellers," cries Liverpool Jack, savagely surveying the slumbering crowd – "yer goin' to set there all night and not paternize de bar – say? (COHA, 1849, George Thompson, City Crimes or Life in New York and Boston)

These examples indicate that *hello* is not always used as a greeting alone. In (6) it serves as an attention getter. In (7) it is "used to express surprise or to register an unexpected turn of events" (OED "hello2"), while in (8) its predominant function is that of a greeting. The OED records somewhat earlier dates for the two uses illustrated in (6) and (7) but its first example of hello used just as a greeting dates from 1853.

The OED's first example of *hi* dates from 1862. Here, too, COHA has an example that pre-dates this by a decade.

(9) "I've a mind it shall do somebody good; so see you don't give my father any occasion to be out with you; for if you do, I'll give him more." "Ay, ay," said the man comfortably, "you won't tell on me. Hi! Here's somebody! "It was Rufus who suddenly joined the group, whip in hand, and looking like a young Achilles in ploughman's coat and trousers. (COHA, 1852, Susan Warner, Hills of the Shatemuc).

There are 249 attestations of *hi* in COHA that are earlier than 1852, but all of them are OCR errors for "in" or "his", syllables of laughter or the dialect form of "I".

The frequency of *good morning* does not change very much over the four periods. It starts with about eight instances per million words, rises to about ten instances in the third period and falls back to about eight instances per million words in the last period. It may be suspected that it is often replaced by the more informal *morning*. However, in the data included in COHA this does not seem to be the case. In order to find out how often *morning* is used as a greeting without the modifier *good*, I manually searched random samples of 100 hits for each of the twenty decades covered by COHA and on this basis calculated the estimated frequency per decade and the frequency per million words for each decade. It turns out that greetings account only for a very small number of all occurrences of *morning* (somewhere between 1% and 5% depending on decade). Statistics on greetings based on samples of 100 occurrences of *morning* are, therefore, necessarily very difficult. In the 2000 hits of *morning* that were hand-searched, there

were 68 instances in which the search term was part of the greeting *good morning*. However, only two instances out of the 2000 hits were instances of an unmodified use of the term *morning* as a greeting. Closer inspection of these two instances revealed that both occurred in contexts in which they were surrounded by several identical instances. These are given in extracts (10) and (11).

(10) They had come bearing gifts which they bestowed upon him noisily, while the remainder of the delegation crowded in. His three sisters kissed him in succession, in the ascending order of age, and he shook hands with his brothers-in-law. "Morning, Amzi!" "Morning, Lawrence!" "Morning, Amzi!" "Morning, Paul!" "Morning, Amzi!" "Morning, Alec!" These greetings were as stiff as those that pass between a visiting statesman and the local yeomanry at a rural reception. Lawrence, Paul, and Alec undoubtedly hated this perfunctory annual tribute to the head of the house of Montgomery, but Amzi liked the perpetuation of his father's house as a family center. (COHA, 1913, Meredith Nicholson, *Otherwise Phyllis*)

(11) They went to call on Billy who, before he even said hello, read, "In Dumbarton, England, brides over twenty are married in sackcloth." An ugly stream of laughter jetted from his mouth and then he welcomed his visitors, pointed to a lard can full of cherries that they might eat and opening *The Northern Farmer*, read them a joke. It was a dialogue dealing with the taciturnity of New England farmers and Billy read it with lugubrious solemnity: "Morning, Si." "Morning, Josh." "What'd you feed your horse for bots?" "Turpentine." "Morning, Si." "Morning, Josh." Two days later: "Morning, Si." "Morning, Josh." "What'd you say you fed your horse for bots?" "Turpentine." "Killed mine." "Mine too." "Morning, Si." "Morning, Josh." Andrew had thought it an excellent joke but no one at Congreve house had even grinned when he repeated it. (COHA, 1952, Jean Stafford, *Catherine Wheel*)

It is interesting to note that in both cases *morning* is used reciprocally by all the characters involved in the interaction, and the author uses *morning* instead of *good morning* in order to make a point about the people who share these greetings. In one case the greetings are described as "stiff", and in the other the conversationalists are described as taciturn farmers. This does not accord easily with the everyday perception of *morning* as an informal variant of the more formal *good morning*. However, the two instances out of 2000 hits do not allow any accurate estimation of the overall frequency of *morning* as an unmodified greeting in the entire COHA but they clearly indicate that in the registers represented in COHA it is not a frequent phenomenon.

Figure 2 provides the distribution of leave-taking expressions in COHA.

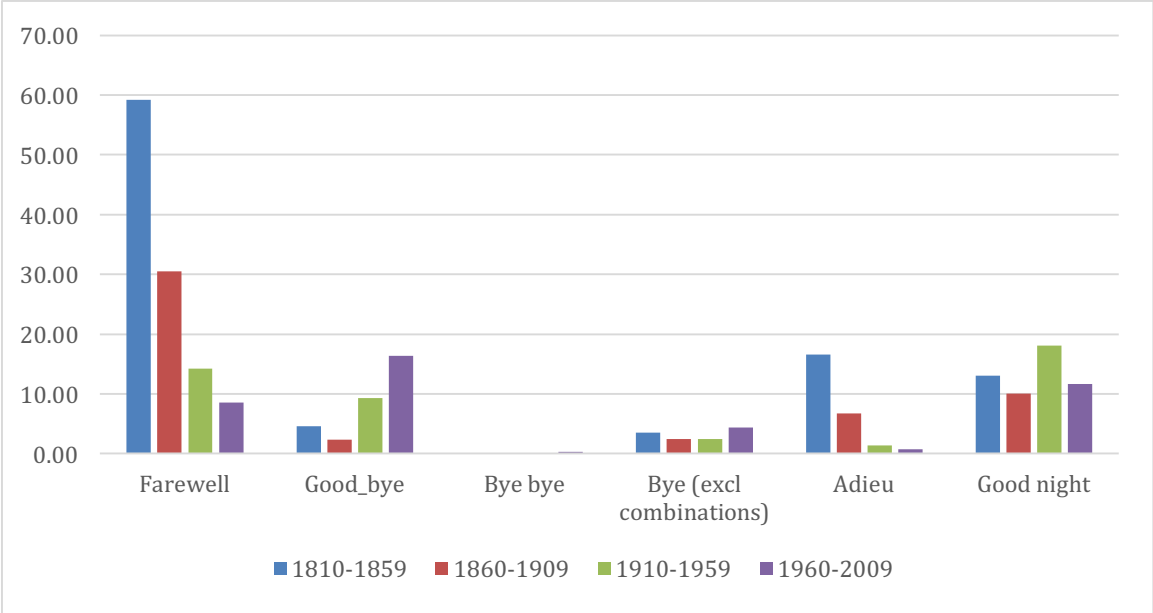

Figure 2: Leave-taking expressions in COHA (frequency per million words)

In the first period, it is clearly the leave-taking expression *farewell* that predominates with almost 60 instances per million words, but its frequency rapidly and consistently diminishes over the four periods. *Adieu* shows an equally remarkable reduction over the four periods but it was always clearly less frequent than *farewell*.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century *goodbye* was usually spelt in two words as *good bye*. By the 1880s the two spellings were about equally frequent, and today the spelling in one word is clearly the norm. In the statistics of Figure 2, the two spellings were combined. It shows a steady increase over the three most recent periods. It was in the 1940s that the two leave-taking expressions were equally frequent (about 12 instances per million words). Since the 1950s, *goodbye* has been consistently more frequent than *farewell*. The leave-taking expression *bye* has never been as frequent as one might have expected. In the most recent period it reaches its highest level at just over four instances per million words. In its reduplicated version *bye bye*, it is almost non-existent. *Good night*, finally, does not show any clear development in its frequency across the four periods of the COHA.

The next section focuses in on two expressions that appear to have a special status within greeting sequences, *how are you* and *how do you do*.

5.2 "How do you do?" and "How are you?"

Semantically the phrases "how are you?" and "how do you do?" appear to be requests for information on the well-being of the addressee. But pragmatically things are more complex. Today, "how are you?" or its extended form "how are you doing?" are often perceived to be entirely formulaic. An answer does not seem to be required. Instead it is reciprocated with the same phrase that again remains unanswered. The phrase "how do you do?" is perceived to be even more formulaic and entirely restricted to situations of formal introductions. It is, therefore, interesting to have a closer look at how these two phrases developed over the two centuries of the COHA.

Figure 3 shows the development over the four half-centuries of the COHA. In both cases the figures had to be adjusted to account for false hits. The phrases are often used as part of longer questions. Extracts (12) and (13) provide relevant examples.

(12) How are you going to get anything fit to ride in New York, at such short notice? (COHA, 1883, F. Marion Crawford, Doctor Claudius, A True Story)

(13) He had been told to make friends. How do you do that in middle age, when all your previous friendships were forged and flourished in childhood? (COHA, 2008, Edna Buchanan, Legally dead)

In order to exclude such examples, a manual search was performed on all the relevant hits in COHA. For decades with less than one hundred hits, all of them were inspected. For decades with more than one hundred hits, a random sample of one hundred hits was inspected, and the total number of false hits for this decade was calculated on this basis. The figures, therefore, are no more than relatively accurate approximations. It might be suspected that a simple search for these strings followed by a punctuation mark would have provided the correct figures but this is not the case. Both of them are often followed by time adverbials that are not separated off by a comma, as for instance in extract (14).

(14) "William, how are you today?" he called in his loud, husky voice that sounded as if his throat was clogged with phlegm. (COHA, 1954, Chester Himes, Third Generation)

In the case of "how are you", examples of "how are you doing" were included in the count if *doing* was not followed by a direct object. All other cases of continuations of "how are you" were excluded.

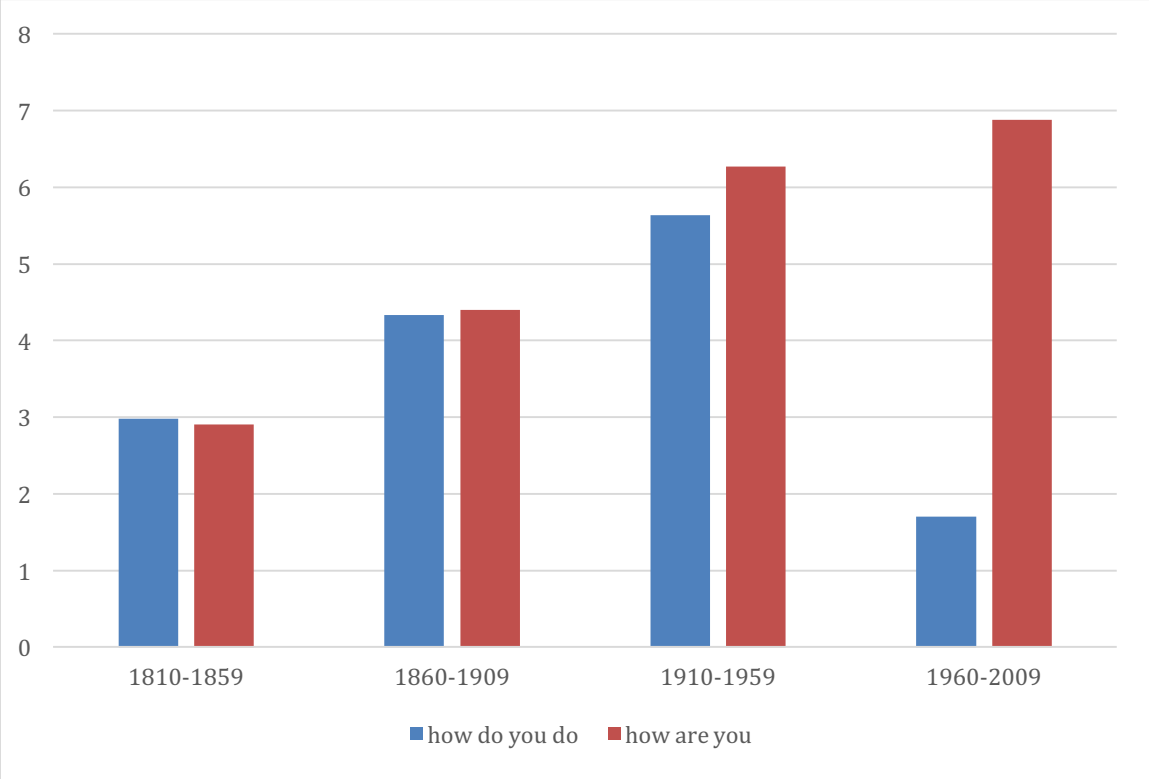

Figure 3: “How do you do” and “how are you” in COHA (frequency per million words) (figures are adjusted to exclude false hits)

There is a very clear frequency development over the four periods of COHA. The frequency of both phrases increases at almost identical rates from roughly three instances per million words to about twice as many in the third period. It is only in the last period that the developments diverge. “How are you” continues to grow a little, while the frequency of “how do you do” is reduced to a third of its former value. Its frequency in the fourth period amounts to only a fourth of the frequency of “how are you”.

However, the statistics do not say anything about the way in which the two phrases are used and whether the usage patterns have changed over time. A closer inspection of a large number of selected examples across all the decades reveal subtle changes, which are, however, often difficult to pinpoint. Most periods show a variety of different uses and it is not always possible to ascertain all the subtleties of individual usages because of a lack of a larger context. COHA provides an extended context of about 170 words for each hit, but this is often not enough to glean a solid understanding of the relationships of the characters depicted in the extract and their style of talking to each other.

For the early decades, there is evidence that “how are you” can be used both as a real question inquiring after the well-being of the addressee and as a formulaic opening of an interaction. Extracts (15) to (18) provide relevant examples.

(15) “My good friend,” said the doctor, “how are you this morning?” “Oh – better – thank you – much better,” he said, drawing his short breath quickly with nearly every word; “I shall be well soon.” (COHA, 1835, Theodore S. Fay, Norman Leslie: A Tale of the Present Times Volume 1)

(16) Give us some supper, Tawney, (speaking to the man who waited.) Pony up, pony up, boys, let’s talk and have something to eat. “How are you, Bob?” speaking to his brother. “Ah!” said Bob, “I feel a little sickish about my stomach.” “And how are you, Gibson?” “I feel very stiff and sore,” said Gibson. “I should wonder if you did not,” said Wilson; though he took care not to speak very loud. (COHA, 1827, Anne Newport Royall, The Tennessean: A Novel, Founded on Facts)

(17) Ned Rifton sprang to his feet. “Don’t let us have a scene here,” said the malicious girl. “H – I and – ” “Ah, Ned, how are you,” said Frank Block, advancing. “Miss Willis, may I request your hand for the next dance?” “Certainly.” And she gave her hand to Frank, with a triumphant smile, as she noticed Ned’s amazement. (COHA 1843, A. J. H. Duganne, The Two Clerks)

(18) As soon as he saw me, he caught me by the hand, and dragged me into the store. “How are you this morning, Colonel?” he said. “Very well, I thank you,” I replied, speaking as respectfully as I knew how; “are you well?” “Fine as silk,” said Mr. Lummucks. (COHA, 1839, Charles F. Briggs, The Adventures of Harry Franco, volume 1)

In extract (15) the phrase is used by a doctor inquiring after the health of what must be a patient, and the answer appears to be a genuine report of his well-being. In (16), too, the phrase receives more than just a conventional and non-committal answer. The two

characters Bob and Gibson provide answers which make clear that they treated Wilson's use of the phrase "how are you" as a genuine question. They do not feel very well, and they do not hesitate to say so. Extract (17) provides a different example. Here the phrase is uttered by a character joining a conversation but the text does not record any response whatsoever. It comes across as a conventional phrase that is used as a mere acknowledgement of another character. Frank Block addresses Ned, but even from this short extract, it is clear that he is not interested in entering into an exchange with Ned. Instead he asks Miss Willis for a dance, and the narrator's focus shifts accordingly. In extract (18), finally, the phrase receives a positive answer that has a ring of some conventionality to it. The scene appears to be a chance encounter of two characters, the I-narrator, a Colonel, and Mr. Lummucks, presumably a shop-owner. The only greetings that they exchange are the questions after the other's health, and both characters respond to the question with an enthusiastically affirmative answer. It is noteworthy that the I-narrator reciprocates the question not in its conventional form, "how are you" but in a slight variation, "are you well?"

The phrase "how do you do", too, is often used as a genuine question about the well-being of the addressee in the early decades of the COHA, but on occasions it is also used as what appears to be a merely conventional conversation opener.

(19) Enter James. He bows gravely.
Miss Woodberry: How do you do, Mr. Trevors?
James Trevors: O, the quintessence of good health; never better madam, I thank you, in my life. (COHA, 1818, Maria Pinckney, The Young Carolinians)

(20) Ah! see Miss Damson in yon full crammed box,
In floating ringlets waves – her wig's soft locks;
While Bobby Slyboots, with an anxious mien,
Ogles beside her, and she hopes, unseen.
Dear Susan (*sighs*) sighs, – ah! Bobby, is it you?
I'm squeezed to death! Miss Fretful how do you do?
Dear me, I'm suffocated; but my dear,
You know it's all the *fashion* to be here.
There's Mr. Easy in that box, ods life!
Talking to every woman – but his wife.
(COHA, 1815, Joseph Hutton, Fashionable Follies[2])

(21) Servant: A gentleman inquires for my master. I believe it is Sir Cunning.
Mr. Banker: Show him in.
Enter Sir Cunning.
Sir Cunning: How do you do, gentlemen? How are you to-day?
Mr. Banker: I am glad to see you.

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[2] This extract has been checked against the original text as found on books.google.ch. It turns out that the extract is part of the prologue of the play and was originally formatted in lines of verse. A typographical error has been corrected in the version represented here. COHA's version "in you full crammed box" should be "in yon full crammed box". Italics have been added in accordance with the original text.

Sir Cunning: Well, Mr. Secretary, any thing new to-day?
(COHA, 1826, fl. Mead, Wall-Street As It Now Is)

In extract (19), the phrase receives a very exuberant answer. The character called James Trevors feels exceedingly well. Extract (20), which derives from the prologue of a play, paints the picture of spectators in a theatre and describes their attitudes, gestures and petty conversations. The phrase, directed at a certain Miss Fretful, is part of this exchange of trivialities, but it receives an answer that acknowledges its semantic import. The addressee feels suffocated in the theatre but wants to be in the theatre anyway because it is the fashion of the day. In extract (21), both the phrases "how do you do" and "how are you" are used in the same utterance by a Sir Cunning, but in this case the addressee, Mr. Banker, does not report on his well-being. He replies with an equally conventional phrase indicating his pleasure at the encounter.

By the middle of the nineteenth century "how do you do" appears to be used more and more as a formulaic greeting and less often as a real question. By the beginning of the twentieth century the examples multiply that show a close association of "how do you do" with formal introductions. Its use increasingly becomes associated with the specific situation of a greeting between strangers, and it increasingly it receives a "how do you do" as a response. Extracts (22) and (23) provide relevant examples.

(22) PEALE Come this way – it'll be quieter for you if he's noisy.
Goes to ELLERY, takes his arm, and leads him to door lower right
GRAYSON enters door lower right. Oh, how do you do, Mr. Clark?
ELLERY Oh, how do you do?
They shake hands.
PEALE pushing him out.
Never mind the social chatter. Ellery, you don't mind my calling you Ellery – do you, Ellery?
To her You see, Ellery has work to do.
Exit ELLERY. (COHA, 1914, Walter Anthony Hackett, It Pays to Advertise)

(23) MR. WEBSTER (as he is taking seat on couch R. of JIM). You're Mr. Hurley, I imagine?
JIM HURLEY Yes, sir.
MR. WEBSTER (extending his hand.) I'm Mr. Webster.
JIM HURLEY (taking his hand.) Oh, how do you do, Mr. Webster. I want to apologize, I
MR. WEBSTER (interrupting him.) That's all right, my boy. I understand. You're having a bad time.
(COHA, 1927, George Michael, Cohan, The Baby Cyclone)

It is interesting to note that in extract (22) the exchange of the phrase "how do you do" is described as "social chatter" by one of the characters. In (23) the phrase is not responded to but the next utterance is explicitly marked as an interruption.

In the twentieth century, the phrase "how are you" increasingly becomes a greeting that has lost its original function as a question.

(24) "What forest?" Belle began to ask, when a curly dog rushed down upon them, and on the bridge above their heads they saw the magician waving his hand. "Well,

Curly Q. How are you?" cried Rosalind. "There's Morgan," said Belle; "you know him, don't you?" (COHA, 1902, Mary Finley Leonard, Mr. Pat's Little Girl, A Story of the Arden Foresters)

(25) "Hi yi yi, doggone yore old hide, if it ain't you big as coffee, Clay. Thinks I to myse'f, who is that pilgrim? And, by gum, it's old hell-a-mile jes' a-hittin' his heels. Where you been at, you old skeezicks?" "How are you, Johnnie? And what are you doin' here?" The Runt was the kind of person who tells how he is when any one asks him. He had no imagination, so he stuck to the middle of the road for fear he might get lost. "I'm jes' tol'able, Clay. I got a kinda misery in my laigs from trompin' these hyer streets. (COHA, 1920, William MacLeod Raine, The Big-Town Round-Up)

In (24), "how are you" is not overtly responded to. It is used in connection with official introductions. In (25) the phrase does receive an answer, but the narrator explicitly points out that not everybody would do this. The addressee is the kind of person who actually provides an answer about his health when he is asked. Apparently, this is unusual enough to deserve a special comment by the narrator.

The following extracts illustrate the uses of "how are you?" and "how do you do?" in the two most recent decades of COHA. The examples illustrate the difference between the two phrases. The former has kept its ambivalent nature of a conventional conversation opener and a real question asking about the well-being of the addressee, while the latter has become even more formulaic with a very restricted range of uses.

(26) Mrs. Allingham walked with a limp, and it took her ages to get to the phone. Nine rings. "Hello?" "Mrs. Allingham, it's Delia." "Delia, dear! How are you?" "I'm fine, how are you?" "Oh, we're fine, doing just fine. Enjoying this nice spring weather! Nearly forgot what sunshine looks like, till today." "Yes, me too," (COHA, 1993, David Eddings, The Shining Ones)

(27) SHE Hello?
HE Hi, it's me.
SHE Hi.
HE How are you?
SHE Pregnant. How are you?
HE Constipated, pains in my stomach, in my chest.
SHE Sick as a dog, I nearly passed out in the bank today.
(COHA, 1991, Linda Griffiths, The Darling Family)

(28) When I came home from the REDBOOK shoot the other day, I was so exhausted. I had worked late nights all week, and when I got home, my ex-husband actor Jon Tenney was dropping off Emerson. He said to me, "How are you?" And I just stood there on the doorstep and started sobbing. He held me, and as I was standing there sobbing, I said. "Thank you for holding me; I really need you to hold me, and I'm sorry I didn't let myself need you more in our marriage, because that probably didn't feel that good. (COHA, 2006, Lori Berger, "It's been an intense journey"

In extract (26), the two characters, Mrs. Allingham and Delia, exchange greetings. The phrase "how are you?" is first used by Mrs. Allingham and then reciprocated by Delia. Both characters answer with what appears to be an equally conventional "I'm fine" or "we're doing just fine". This is the kind of example that people must have in mind when they consider the question "how are you?" as entirely conventional and insincere, even though it is, of course, impossible to know how serious or merely conventional the exchange in (26) is, given the very limited context provided by COHA. Extract (27) is rather different. Here the two characters in a play, called SHE and HE, also exchange what appears to be conventional "how are you's" but they receive rather unusual answers; "pregnant" and "constipated". Without more context, it is again difficult to decide what the true nature of this exchange is. In (28) the question "how are you" receives a non-verbal answer. The I-narrator and recipient of the question starts sobbing. The following examples illustrate the recent use of "how do you do?".

(29) KELLY Come in. Janine, is that you? Come in. Come -- (Zelda stops in mid-sentence in awe at the sight of MARY as she enters. She is a plain, simple creature. A baby pouch is slung across her chest. Mary is overwhelmed by the room. Zelda stares at Mary and the baby with a strange sense of hunger.) BAKER Wow. Never seen anything like this. KELLY How do you do? You're? BAKER Mary Baker, ma'am. How do you do? KELLY Just fine. (COHA, 1991, Velina Hasu Houston, Necessities)

(30) The black suit is my mother's principle, but also the tradition, like greeting someone with "How do you do," which nobody takes as a real, literal question. (COHA, 1998, Janko Polic Kamov, Freedom)

(31) He checked in his valise to be sure the Bibles were arranged, pulled out the box containing a Bible, walked up and knocked on the screen door. He heard steps. The inside door opened and a woman stood holding a cooking pot and a drying rag. "How do you do, ma'am? My name is Henry Dampier, and I have a little something in this box that is mighty nice that I'd like to show you if you don't mind. It's something I think you might like-if I could step inside for a minute, maybe." (COHA, 2008, Clyde Edgerton, The Bible salesman: a novel)

In extract (29), "how do you do?" is reciprocated. It is clearly formal and it is linked with formal introductions, but in one case it receives a reply, "just fine". Extract (30) is particularly interesting because the I-narrator provides a meta assessment of the phrase. The phrase is as traditional as a black suit, and the I-narrator specifies that nobody takes it "as a real, literal question." In extract (31), "how do you do, ma'am?" is clearly not meant as a question. It is linked to an introduction. A salesperson introduces himself and uses the phrase as a conversation opener but he does not give his addressee a chance to reciprocate or even to answer the opening of his utterance.

In conclusion, it can be said that formulaic and literal uses of the two phrases "how do you do?" and "how are you?" have coexisted throughout the two centuries covered by COHA. But the evidence seems to suggest that in the nineteenth century the phrases were more regularly used in their literal senses as genuine questions. In the course of the twentieth century, the merely conventional uses with only a residue of the original literal

force seem on the increase. The evidence is based on a large number of relatively clear-cut examples. However, the evidence is impossible to quantify with any kind of precision because of the ultimately ambiguous nature of both phrases even in seemingly clear-cut cases. Irrespective of how they were meant by the speaker, the addressee may discursively assign them a more formulaic or a less formulaic value. It is also clear that the phrase "how do you do?" has lost even more of its original potential to be used as a genuine question than the phrase "how are you?". It is not only linked to conversation openings but to conversation openings between interactants who were not previously acquainted with each other, which often gives the situation an air of heightened formality. As a result of the increased formality, "how do you do?" has dropped significantly in its frequency.

6 Conclusion

The analysis of greetings and farewells across the two centuries of American English covered by the *Corpus of Historical American English* above has highlighted some of the problems encountered by any diachronic study of speech acts. It is very difficult to retrieve the relevant sequences with corpus-linguistic tools. Generally, the researcher has to resort to a retrieval of words and phrases that are known to occur in the speech act in question. But this, of course, means that innovative and unexpected expressions for greetings and farewells will not be discovered. Sequences of non-verbal greetings and farewells likewise will remain hidden.

On the positive side, the study has provided some interesting insights into the frequency developments of a range of greetings and farewells. *Hi* and *hello*, are the most frequent ones in Present-day American English, while "good morning" and "how are you?" dominated in the nineteenth century. In the case of farewells, it is *goodbye* and "bye bye" which dominate today, while *farewell* has all but lost the dominating position it had in the early decades of American English.

A closer analysis of the two phrases "how are you?" and "how do you do?" has further indicated the importance of studying them in their larger context of occurrence. In some cases, they are used as real questions with the literal force of asking for the addressee's well-being and in other cases they are more or less formulaic openings of conversations. And very often they are actually ambivalent between the two uses. Their status as a formulaic opening or as a real question is determined discursively by how the addressee treats it. The addressee may be aware that the speaker was likely to have meant it as a real question, or the speaker may just assign one or the other interpretation irrespective of the speaker's likely intention. For the analyst, it is even more difficult to ascertain speaker intentions in particular in the case of search results retrieved from a corpus such as COHA. As a result, frequency developments of the different uses are impossible to quantify with precision.

The problems encountered in this study highlight two of the fundamental predicaments of corpus pragmatics. First, the study has shown that the retrieval of specific speech acts is still difficult, because search strings needed for corpus-linguistic investigations rely on formulaic patterns. It is difficult to achieve good levels of recall and precision, and it is not even possible to assess these levels with any degree of accuracy. The problem is exacerbated if the research is not just interested in individual

speech acts, such as greetings or farewells, but more generally in extended greeting or farewell sequences. And second, corpus pragmatics takes advantage of very powerful corpus-linguistic retrieval tools, but this power comes at the price of lost contexts. Salutation sequences (and presumably others) need to be studied in their specific cultural contexts, but search hits retrieved from corpora provide only a very limited amount of context, which for the pragmaticist is often insufficient to determine the relevant dimensions of the relationship between the speakers, their shared common ground and the larger conversational context in which the extract appears.

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